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Media Representations of Cyberbullying and Their Relationship to Criminalisation: A Child-Centred Analysis from Hungary

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Abstract

Media representations play a key role in shaping how cyberbullying is understood, problematized, and regulated, particularly in relation to children and young people in the digital environment. While legal scholarship has extensively examined the criminalisation of cyberbullying, less attention has been paid to how these legal developments are reflected in media discourse. This study addresses this gap by analysing the relationship between criminal-law responses and media representations of cyberbullying in Hungary within a broader European context. The research combines a qualitative media discourse analysis of 82 articles from leading Hungarian online news portals (2024–2025) with a comparative legal analysis of criminalisation patterns across EU Member States and a descriptive examination of the Hungarian offence of “online aggression”. The findings identify three dominant media narratives—child protection and social problem framing, criminal justice framing, and regulatory discourse—of which the first is the most prevalent. The results also reveal a limited alignment between legal regulation and media representation, as criminal-law approaches to cyberbullying appear only marginally in media narratives, which instead emphasise prevention, awareness, and institutional responses. These findings suggest that media discourse not only reflects but also shapes societal understandings of cyberbullying, highlighting the importance of considering media narratives in the development and evaluation of legal and policy responses.

Keywords: cyberbullying; media discourse; media framing; children; children’s rights; criminalisation; online aggression; Hungary

1. Introduction

The media plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of deviant behaviour and in influencing how legal responses to such behaviour are assessed. In the social science and sociology of law literature, the concept of media framing refers to a specific process. In this process, media content highlights certain aspects of a given social phenomenon while downplaying others. In doing so, it creates a particular interpretative framework. Framing encompasses the definition of problems and the identification of causes. It also includes the articulation of moral evaluations and the delineation of possible solutions. These elements may significantly influence whether a particular phenomenon is understood as a social, pedagogical, psychological, or criminal issue (Entman 1993).

Media representations of cyberbullying may also be interpreted through the distinction between episodic and thematic framing. Episodic frames focus on specific incidents, individual victims, or dramatic events, often presenting cyberbullying through emotionally charged narratives involving severe harm or tragic consequences. In contrast, thematic



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frames situate cyberbullying within broader social, institutional, or structural contexts, emphasising issues such as children's digital safety, prevention, media literacy, platform governance, or educational responsibilities (Milosevic 2015).

Media discourse may be understood as a form of institutional discourse through which social meanings and public interpretations of social issues are constructed and communicated (Tavadze et al. 2024). In the context of cyberbullying, media discourse plays an important role in shaping how online aggression involving children is interpreted, framed, and connected to broader concerns relating to safety, harm, responsibility, and regulation.

Media narratives do more than report incidents of cyberbullying; they arrange events into recognizable storylines. U.S. newspaper coverage frequently uses victim exemplars, often cases ending in suicide, to represent the risk of cyberbullying (Young et al. 2021). Malaysian newspaper coverage similarly organizes cyberbullying within frames of prevention/intervention, sometimes as individual episodes, sometimes as a broader social issue, combining episodic and thematic storytelling (Yang 2020).

The role of the media becomes particularly pronounced in the social interpretation of deviance and crime. According to Stanley Cohen's moral panic theory, the media may amplify certain forms of deviant behaviour by portraying them as significant social threats, thereby contributing to heightened public concern and demands for stronger social control and legal intervention (Cohen 2011). In the context of cyberbullying, media coverage focusing on tragic or extreme cases involving children may reinforce perceptions of cyberbullying as an urgent societal and criminal problem, potentially shaping public attitudes toward criminalisation and digital regulation.

In the digital media environment, the amplification of perceived social threats is increasingly shaped not only by traditional media logics but also by the dynamics of online visibility and virality. According to Puryear et al., social media platforms may intensify moral panic processes by amplifying perceptions of danger and societal threat through highly visible and repeatedly circulated content (Puryear et al. 2024). In the context of cyberbullying, viral media coverage of severe incidents involving children may contribute to the construction of cyberbullying as a socially urgent and emotionally charged problem, reinforcing demands for intervention, regulation, and accountability.

From a cultural criminological perspective, media representations do not merely reflect social reality but actively participate in constructing the social meaning of crime, deviance, and victimisation. Cultural criminology emphasises the centrality of meaning-making, representation, and mediated interpretations in shaping public understandings of social harm (Ferrell 2013; Chancer 2024). In this framework, cyberbullying may be understood not only as an interpersonal online behaviour but also as a socially constructed problem shaped through media discourse, emotional public reactions, and institutional narratives.

In the digital environment, new risks affecting children's rights (Livingstone and Stoilova 2021)—particularly cyberbullying—are often reported in the media with a focus on severe cases and tragic consequences. News media frequently portray the risks of cyberbullying through individual victim narratives, which may become central elements in the social representation of the phenomenon (Young et al. 2021). These narratives are often associated with extreme outcomes, such as adolescent suicide, and tend to appear in the media in the form of dramatized narratives (Young et al. 2017).

Although such reporting may contribute to increasing the social visibility of the problem, it may also promote the framing of the phenomenon primarily as an episodic or a criminal issue in public discourse. This process may lead to the strengthening of a discourse of criminalization, in which criminal law is presented as the primary means of addressing a social problem (Bailey 2014). At the same time, some authors, referring to the severe social consequences of cyberbullying, consider the strengthening of criminal

law regulation to be justified, particularly in cases where civil or administrative measures prove insufficient (Wang 2025).

Cyberbullying is a significant social and public health challenge of the digital age, particularly affecting children and adolescents (Zhu et al. 2021). The phenomenon is characterized by the absence of temporal and spatial constraints, the rapid and widespread dissemination of online content, the frequent anonymity of perpetrators, and the presence of power imbalances in interactions (Milosevic et al. 2023; Lesko et al. 2021). Cyberbullying can be defined as intentional and repeated behaviour carried out by an individual or a group through electronic communication, often characterized by an imbalance of power (Englander et al. 2017). Such forms of bullying may have serious physical, psychological, and social consequences, and may also negatively affect the realization of children's rights (Luk 2021).

Repetition is frequently identified in the cyberbullying literature as one of the defining conceptual elements of the phenomenon, although its necessity as a constitutive criterion remains debated in some scholarly approaches (Fulantelli et al. 2022). Nevertheless, from the perspective of legal regulation—particularly criminal law—it remains important to examine whether repetition appears as an explicit element within the statutory definition of criminal offences related to cyberbullying.

According to the findings of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, approximately 12% of adolescents reported having engaged in online bullying, while around 16% reported having been victims of cyberbullying (Cosma et al. 2024). The spread of social media has further increased the risk associated with the phenomenon. Intensive and problematic social media use, as well as online communication with strangers, are both associated with the perpetration of cyberbullying and victimization (Craig et al. 2020; Martínez-Ferrer et al. 2018). The specific characteristics of social media—such as anonymity, access to a wide audience, and the rapid dissemination of content—create environmental conditions that may increase both the likelihood and persistence of bullying (Chan et al. 2021).

Action against cyberbullying, in connection with the protection of children's rights, is of particular importance at both the international and European levels. The United Nations framework on children's rights emphasizes the obligation of states to protect children from violence—including online harassment—and to ensure the realization of their rights in the digital environment (United Nations 1989; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2011, 2021). The United Nations Human Rights Council has also pointed out that cyberbullying manifests in various forms and may have serious consequences for children's well-being and the realization of their rights (United Nations Human Rights Council 2022).

European policy documents articulate similar priorities in both international legal and European Union legal contexts. The Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child and the initiatives of the European Union both emphasize the importance of protecting children online, particularly in the areas of prevention, awareness-raising, and the development of support mechanisms (Council of Europe 2022; European Commission 2022). The European Commission's action plan against cyberbullying further reinforces this approach by linking the management of the phenomenon to tools such as platform regulation, content moderation, and institutional cooperation (European Commission 2026).

Although the body of academic literature on cyberbullying and its criminal law assessment has been steadily expanding, the concept itself remains marked by definitional uncertainty, with no clear consensus on its defining properties (Xu and Trzaskawka 2021). Existing legal frameworks within the European Union often struggle to respond adequately to cyberbullying-related harms, particularly in the context of child protection (Sekar et al. 2025). At the same time, relatively few studies examine how these legal and regulatory

approaches are represented within media discourse, especially in relation to children's rights, digital safety, and public understandings of cyberbullying. This gap is particularly significant given that media representations may influence how cyberbullying is socially interpreted as a legal, social, and child protection issue.

In response to this research gap, the present study focuses on the Hungarian context in the online press discourse on cyberbullying. On the one hand, the research examines the criminal law approaches to cyberbullying in the Member States of the European Union from a comparative legal perspective. On the other hand, it analyses the regulation of the criminal offence of "online aggression" introduced in the Hungarian legal system and its representation in media discourse, with particular regard to cases involving children.

The empirical analysis focuses on news coverage published in the Hungarian online press and examines the narratives through which cyberbullying cases involving children are represented in the media. It also analyses how the criminal offence of "online aggression" is portrayed as a criminal law instrument for addressing cyberbullying, and how these media narratives shape societal perceptions of cyberbullying affecting children, as well as the role of criminal law intervention. The study further seeks to determine the extent to which media framing patterns identified in the literature—particularly narratives centred on so-called high-profile cases—are reflected in Hungarian media discourse.

2. Methods

The study is based on a combination of methods, enabling a joint examination of the criminal law and media discourse approaches to the phenomenon of cyberbullying. The primary analytical focus of the research is media discourse analysis, while the legal analysis serves a complementary and contextualizing role. The research consists of three main components: (1) a comparative legal analysis exploring the criminalization approaches of the Member States of the European Union, (2) a descriptive analysis of Hungarian criminal law regulation, and (3) an empirical media discourse analysis.

The examination of harms emerging in the digital environment requires the combined analysis of criminal law, social, and platform governance dimensions, including content moderation practices and regulatory obligations affecting online communication platforms and digital media services (Hrecska-Kovács 2025). Platform governance is particularly relevant to the present research, as the Hungarian offence of "online aggression" specifically applies to conduct committed in publicly accessible online communication spaces, thereby linking criminal law regulation to the moderation and governance of digital platforms.

2.1. Comparative Legal Analysis of Criminalisation in EU Member States

The first phase of the research examines the criminal law approaches of the Member States of the European Union to behaviours associated with cyberbullying. The analysis is based on a comparative study conducted by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission, which analysed relevant criminal law provisions appearing in the legislation of countries within the European Economic Area. The JRC study identified six conceptual elements that appear in different forms in the criminal regulation of cyberbullying-related conduct: (1) the presence of aggressive or offensive behaviour, (2) the use of digital technology, (3) the repetitive nature of the conduct, (4) the intent of the perpetrator, (5) power imbalance, and (6) the social context (Villar Onrubia et al. 2025).

The present study applies these conceptual elements as an analytical framework and, on this basis, conducts a descriptive comparative analysis of the criminal law approaches of the Member States of the European Union, with the aim of identifying common patterns and differences in the criminalisation of cyberbullying. The comparative analysis follows

a functional approach, which compares legal solutions across different legal systems that fulfil similar social functions (Zweigert and Kötz 1998).

2.2. Descriptive Analysis of the Hungarian Legal Framework

The second part of the research focuses on the examination of Hungarian criminal law regulation. The analysis applies a descriptive legal method, which is based on the combined examination of relevant criminal law provisions, legislative reasoning, and the emerging practice of law enforcement. This approach is consistent with Hungarian legal scholarship, which, in the analysis of online aggression and other digital phenomena, seeks to explore the relationship between the normative framework and its practical operation (Gáspár 2025).

Within this framework, the study reviews those criminal law provisions that may be relevant to harassing or offensive conduct carried out through digital technologies in the context of cyberbullying affecting children. The analysis also includes a detailed examination of the new criminal law provision on online aggression introduced into the Hungarian Criminal Code in 2025, regarding its policy rationale and the initial experiences of its application.

The aim of the analysis is to identify how Hungarian criminal law regulation responds to cyberbullying-related conduct and the extent to which it aligns with European trends in criminalisation. In this context, the study also considers that the legal assessment of harms emerging in the digital environment—including cyberbullying—necessarily extends beyond narrowly defined criminal law categories and requires the combined interpretation of social, technological, and platform regulatory contexts.

2.3. Media Discourse Analysis (Primary Analytical Component)

The central empirical component of the research is media discourse analysis, which examines the representation of cyberbullying and online aggression in the Hungarian digital media environment. The aim of the analysis is to explore how legal responses to cyberbullying are reflected in the media and to identify the narratives that emerge in relation to cyberbullying as a risk affecting children, as well as the corresponding criminal law responses.

The selection of the sample was based on a media market report published by the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, which ranks the most visited Hungarian online news outlets based on average daily reach (real users). The report relies on measurement data, covering domestic internet users aged 16–75, and examines the period between the first half of 2023 and the first half of 2025 (National Media and Infocommunications Authority 2025a).

The study included those online news outlets whose archived articles are freely accessible on their websites, meaning that their content is available without registration or payment. The empirical analysis of media discourse covered articles from eight high-traffic Hungarian online news portals: index.hu, blikk.hu, telex.hu, origo.hu, borsonline.hu, 444.hu, femina.hu, and nlc.hu. Relevant media content was identified through keyword searches conducted in the archives of these outlets for the period between 1 January 2024 and 31 December 2025. The search was conducted using the following Hungarian-language keywords: “cyberbullying”, “online abuse”, “online harassment”, and “online aggression”. The use of predefined keywords may have influenced the selection of articles, as media content addressing cyberbullying without explicitly using these terms could not be captured.

The analysis of media discourse was conducted using qualitative content analysis. A total of 82 articles ($n = 82$) were included in the sample. The sample consisted of articles

addressing cyberbullying, online abuse, or online harassment in relation to children. An exception was made for articles related to the offence of “online aggression”. In this case, the analysis also included media content that did not concern specific cases involving children but focused on the legislative proposal introducing the offence, as well as its representation in parliamentary and media discourse.

The coding process involved two researchers. Primary coding was carried out by one researcher based on predefined coding categories, while the second researcher reviewed the coded data for verification purposes. Any interpretative discrepancies were resolved through joint discussion, and the final coding decisions were reached by consensus.

The selected media content was recorded in a structured, Excel-based database. Manual coding was applied during data processing: each article was analysed individually, and its content characteristics were recorded according to the coding categories defined in Table 1. No discourse analysis software was used. The identification of narratives was carried out through qualitative content analysis.

Table 1. Coding categories used in the media discourse analysis.

Category	Description
Media source	The name of the news outlet in which the article was published
Date of publication	The date on which the article was published
Type of article	News report, coverage, analysis, interview, or opinion piece
Context of cyberbullying	Specific criminal case, legislative change, policy debate, or general presentation of the phenomenon
Actors involved	Child as a victim, minor perpetrator, adult perpetrator, authorities, experts
Criminal law element	Presence of criminal proceedings, investigation, legislative change, or court proceedings
Narrative frame	Presentation of cyberbullying as a social problem, criminal issue, or a social/child protection problem
Involvement of children	Whether the article explicitly addresses a case involving children or minors
Reported consequences	Presentation of psychological, social, or legal consequences

The coding framework was developed prior to the empirical analysis in the form of a structured codebook containing predefined variables, category descriptions, and coding values. The codebook combined descriptive and interpretive categories relating to media framing, criminal law references, representations of children, dominant behavioural forms, and narrative emphasis. Several variables were operationalised through predefined categorical values (e.g., article type, framing categories, criminal law references and child involvement), while qualitative notes were used to record contextual or interpretive observations (Table 1).

The aim of the structured coding was to identify the contexts in which cyberbullying and online aggression appear in the media, the actors that become central in the discourse, and the ways in which criminal law responses are represented in media content. The database enabled the systematic organisation of media content and supported the identification of discursive patterns relating to the media representation of cyberbullying, the actors involved, and the framing of the phenomenon in terms of child protection, criminal law, or broader social perspectives.

The coding process combined deductive and interpretive elements. Deductive categories were developed on the basis of the literature on cyberbullying, media framing, and criminalisation, while interpretive coding focused on identifying dominant narrative patterns, thematic emphases, and recurrent linguistic constructions within the analysed articles. Coding decisions were based on the dominant framing and overall narrative orientation of each article. To enhance methodological transparency and repeatability, the main coding categories and their operational definitions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Operationalisation of the qualitative coding framework.

Coding Category	Operational Interpretation
Narrative frame: social problem/child protection	references to prevention, awareness-raising, online safety, mental health, parental or institutional responsibility
Narrative frame: criminal issue	references to police investigations, criminal offences, prosecution, punishment, criminal liability
Narrative frame: regulatory/policy	references to legislation, online aggression regulation, platform moderation, DSA, institutional regulation
Reported psychological consequences	anxiety, fear, humiliation, trauma, suicide risk, emotional distress
Reported social consequences	exclusion, reputational harm, peer conflict, social isolation
Reported legal consequences	criminal proceedings, investigation, sanctions, legislative response
Actors involved	child victim, juvenile offender, parent, authority, expert, institution

3. Findings

This section presents the findings with a primary focus on the media discourse analysis, which constitutes the central empirical contribution of the study, while the legal analysis provides the contextual framework necessary for the interpretation of media representations.

3.1. Criminalisation Patterns in EU Member States

Drawing on the JRC analysis, the study examines the criminal law regulation of the Member States of the European Union, focusing on the key conceptual elements involved in the criminalisation of cyberbullying. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Conceptual elements of cyberbullying in EU criminal law (based on JRC analysis).

Conceptual Element	Presence in EU Criminal Law	Member States
Aggression/harm	Present in all analysed legal systems except Belgium and Lithuania (25 Member States)	Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, The Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden
Use of digital technology	Present in most systems, but not universal Finland (20 Member States)	Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Hungary, Malta, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia
Repetition	Present in 18 Member States	Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden
Intent	Explicit or implicit in several systems (14 Member States)	Germany, Ireland, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, The Netherlands, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland
Power imbalance	Rarely explicit; mostly indirect (8 Member States)	Czechia, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Malta, Slovenia
Social context	Occasionally included (6 Member States)	Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Latvia, Portugal

Aggressive or offensive behaviour is present in all examined legal systems except in Belgian and Lithuanian criminal law, although it is conceptualised in different ways. Legal provisions, for example, refer to harm to physical or mental health (France), harassment or

threats (Germany, Greece, Italy), violations of honour or reputation (Denmark, Croatia), or humiliation or discrimination (Estonia, Spain, Bulgaria).

The use of digital technology is explicitly reflected in the criminal law provisions of most Member States. Legal texts employ a variety of formulations, such as “electronic devices” (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy), “electronic communications network” (Hungary), “computer systems and networks” (Croatia, Austria), “internet” (Portugal), “social media” (Spain), or “digital media” (France). At the same time, the regulation of several countries—such as Estonia, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Poland, Finland, and Sweden—does not contain explicit references to the use of technology.

Repetition, as a classical characteristic of cyberbullying, appears in most Member States, although not in a uniform manner. The examined criminal law provisions refer to repeated or persistent conduct in 18 Member States, while in several countries—such as Bulgaria, Denmark, Ireland, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, and Malta—this conceptual element is not explicitly present.

Intent is also reflected in the regulation of several Member States, although in different forms. Some legal systems explicitly refer to “intentional” conduct (Ireland, The Netherlands, Slovakia), while in other cases intent appears implicitly, for example in formulations such as “knew or ought to have known” (Cyprus, Luxembourg).

Power imbalance, although a key element in social science definitions of cyberbullying, appears relatively rarely as an explicit conceptual element in criminal law provisions. It is often reflected indirectly, for example through references to the victim’s age, vulnerability, or through aggravating circumstances related to the protection of certain groups, such as children or persons with disabilities.

In some Member States, the offence is also explicitly situated within a social context, for example in cases of harassment occurring in school settings, workplaces, or within family environments.

3.2. *The Hungarian Criminal Law Approach*

Hungarian criminal law regulation does not contain a specific offence explicitly addressing the phenomenon of cyberbullying (Act C of 2012 on the Criminal Code). In cases involving harassing or offensive conduct carried out through digital technologies, the offences of harassment, defamation, or insult are primarily applicable.

However, in 2025, the legislator introduced the criminal offence of “online aggression”, which was placed among offences against public order in the Hungarian Criminal Code (Act LXXVIII of 2024 on Combating Online Aggression).

According to the legislative reasoning, the aim of introducing the new offence was to respond to increasingly frequent hateful or fear-inducing expressions in the online environment, which violate the human dignity of the persons concerned and undermine the quality of public discourse (Gáspár 2025). However, the practical application of the provision remains limited, as the offence is relatively new and no extensive judicial practice has yet developed.

The first dimension of the regulation concerns the criminalisation of conduct occurring on digital communication platforms. Section 332/A of the Hungarian Criminal Code defines online aggression as conduct carried out through an electronic communications network before a large public audience, which expresses a wish for violent death or for a crime committed with particular cruelty against an identifiable person. The provision thus specifically targets content published in online communication spaces, such as public social media platforms or other internet-based environments. At the same time, the regulation excludes statements made in closed or private communication spaces—such as small, closed groups—from its scope. This suggests that the legislator primarily intended to

address content appearing in public online communication spaces, in particular posts published on social media platforms or other publicly accessible online interfaces.

The second dimension of the regulation relates to the operation of digital media platforms. The moderation of user-generated content in the online public sphere—particularly comments—constitutes a central issue of digital media governance. Hungarian statutory law requires publishers of online press products to adopt publicly available policies and implement effective procedures for addressing unlawful user comments (Section 20/A of Act CIV of 2010 on the Freedom of the Press and the Fundamental Rules of Media Content). Building on this legal framework, the Media Council of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority has issued recommendations providing further guidance on the adequacy of such policies and moderation practices ([National Media and Infocommunications Authority 2025b](#)). The introduction of the offence of online aggression therefore affects not only the criminal liability of individual perpetrators but also, indirectly, the moderation practices of digital media platforms.

A further feature of the regulation is that, as of 1 September 2025, criminal proceedings for the offence of online aggression under Section 332/A(1) of the Criminal Code may be initiated or continued only upon a private motion submitted by the entitled party (Section 96 of Act XLIX of 2025 on the Amendment of Certain Acts Relating to Justice (Hungary)). This regulatory solution indicates that the legislator intended to apply the offence primarily in cases requiring a more limited form of criminal law intervention, closely linked to the protection of the affected individual. As the offence is relatively new, no established judicial practice has yet emerged, particularly in cases involving juvenile offenders or offences committed against minors.

Despite this, the introduction of the offence of online aggression received significant media attention during the legislative process; however, no standalone news coverage of the regulatory amendment could be identified in the analysed online news outlets. This may suggest that media discourse on cyberbullying is more strongly linked to specific events and criminal cases than to the presentation of legislative changes.

3.3. Media Representations of Cyberbullying and Online Aggression

Based on the articles analysed in the media discourse analysis ($n = 82$), cyberbullying and online aggression appear in the Hungarian online media within several distinct narrative frames. The qualitative content analysis identified three dominant discursive patterns: (1) the child protection and social problem discourse, (2) the crime-related discourse, and (3) the regulatory and policy discourse.

Considering the sample, the “social problem” frame proved to be the most dominant. A substantial proportion of the articles presented cyberbullying not as an isolated criminal event, but as a social risk affecting children’s online safety, requiring prevention, awareness-raising, and institutional responses. In this context, a large share of media coverage was linked to campaigns, research findings, conferences, school programmes, or information materials issued by authorities or national hotlines.

The sample included eight online news outlets with differing editorial profiles. News-oriented portals (particularly Index, Telex, and Origo) applied a variety of framing approaches, whereas tabloid and lifestyle media (Blikk, Bors, Femina, NLC) more frequently published informative, advisory, or awareness-raising content sometimes related to parental mediation. This suggests that media representations of cyberbullying are not uniform but vary depending on the type of outlet and its editorial orientation.

3.3.1. Child Protection and Social Problem Narrative

Within the most prevalent narrative frame, cyberbullying is primarily presented as a child protection and social problem ($n = 59$). Media content within this category places emphasis on children's and young people's online safety, the risks of the digital environment, the psychological consequences, as well as the importance of prevention and awareness-raising.

A considerable number of articles in the sample were linked to child protection or media literacy campaigns, initiatives by public authorities and civil society organisations, or the dissemination of research findings ($n = 59$). Examples include the activities of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, the Internet Hotline, UNICEF, the Hintalovon Foundation, the Kék Vonal Child Crisis Foundation, as well as various school-based prevention programmes. In these articles, cyberbullying typically appears in the context of children's vulnerability, the lack of digital resilience, or questions of parental and institutional responsibility.

In most of the analysed articles, children appear as affected actors and are primarily positioned as victims or individuals at risk within the discourse ($n = 31$). The language of these articles is often alarming or awareness-raising, particularly when focusing on children's mental health, the psychological consequences of online harassment, or the risks associated with social media. In lifestyle-oriented outlets, this narrative frame frequently takes the form of parental guidance or informative content, whereas in news-oriented portals it is more commonly associated with research data, conferences, or expert commentary.

3.3.2. Criminal Justice Narrative

Within the second narrative frame, cyberbullying or online aggression is presented in a criminal justice context. In such cases ($n = 23$), media articles address the phenomenon primarily in connection with specific incidents, police investigations, or criminal proceedings. The coverage typically emphasizes law enforcement responses, the seriousness of the threat, and issues of criminal liability.

However, based on the sample, this frame is not dominant but rather linked to specific, exceptional cases. The most prominent example was a case reported across multiple media outlets in February 2025, in which a 17-year-old was subject to investigation after posting a threat on social media referring to a school shooting. This case was covered by Index, Blikk, Telex, and Bors, and in each instance, it was linked to the newly introduced offence of online aggression. In these articles, the emphasis was placed on criminal, investigative, and law enforcement aspects, and the child appeared not as a victim but as a minor perpetrator.

At the same time, relatively few articles in the sample portrayed classical forms of cyberbullying—such as repeated peer-to-peer online harassment—as actual criminal law cases ($n = 3$). Criminal framing was more frequently associated with threats, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), or other risks and harms emerging in the digital environment; in several instances ($n = 4$), elements of grooming were present in substance, even without the explicit use of the term. This suggests that media representations of criminalised online behaviour in Hungary do not fully correspond to the concept of cyberbullying as defined in the literature and often conflate different types of online harms.

3.3.3. Regulatory and Policy Narrative

The third narrative frame focuses on the regulatory and policy dimensions of cyberbullying and online aggression, as well as broader issues of digital child protection. Articles within this category present legislative changes, draft laws, official recommendations, institutional programmes, or preventive initiatives.

Within the sample, the media representation of the newly introduced criminal offence of online aggression appeared particularly prominently from a criminalisation perspective. Of the 82 articles analysed, 18 explicitly addressed online aggression, the vast majority of which were linked to the submission of the draft law, its parliamentary debate and adoption, or broader public discourse surrounding the regulation. These articles primarily emphasized the tension between online commenting practices, aggressive online expression, the protection of human dignity, and the limits of freedom of expression.

At the same time, the regulatory discourse reveals that media representations of online aggression only to a limited extent connect the new offence to cyberbullying as a form of online risk affecting children. Most regulatory-focused articles ($n = 17$) did not approach the offence from a child protection or children's rights perspective but rather situated it within the context of the quality of public discourse, online commenting culture, and the boundaries of freedom of expression.

4. Discussion

4.1. Representation of Children in Media Discourse

The findings of the study suggest that the criminal law approach to cyberbullying and its media representation are not fully aligned in the Hungarian context. In Hungarian online media, cyberbullying is primarily framed as a child protection and social problem. In most of the analysed articles ($n = 59$), children and young people are portrayed as actors who are exposed to the risks of the digital environment and in need of protection. Media content frequently refers to research findings, prevention programmes, civil initiatives, or official campaigns aimed at enhancing children's online safety and digital awareness. This pattern is consistent with findings from empirical research on cyberbullying among young people, which highlight the prevalence of psychological forms of online abuse and emphasise the importance of awareness-raising, education, and prevention-oriented responses rather than primarily punitive approaches (Bularca et al. 2024). This convergence suggests that media representations may reflect broader social understandings of cyberbullying as a predominantly social and educational issue.

Within this discourse, cyberbullying is primarily associated with children's mental health, the psychological risks emerging in the online environment, and the responsibilities of parents and institutions. This interpretative framework is consistent with the cyberbullying literature, which describes the phenomenon as a significant risk factor affecting young people's mental well-being and emphasizes the role of family and school environments in prevention and intervention (Cohen-Almagor 2018; Chen et al. 2017; Kasturiratna et al. 2025).

Lifestyle-oriented and advisory content places particular emphasis on parental roles, prevention, and mediation. In contrast, news-oriented outlets tend to address the issue through the presentation of research findings, expert commentary, and institutional programmes. This emphasis on parental mediation is consistent with existing research highlighting the importance of parent-child communication, monitoring strategies, and supportive relationships, as well as the role of mediation strategies in reducing cyberbullying risks (Helfrich et al. 2020; Aljasir and Alsebaei 2022).

Children appear much less frequently as perpetrators in media discourse ($n = 11$). Such representations are typically associated with articles addressing the dynamics of cyberbullying and appear only exceptionally in relation to specific cases. This dual representation—of the child as a victim and, less frequently, as a (potentially criminally liable) perpetrator—contributes to the construction of cyberbullying as both a child protection issue and a potential criminal law problem.

This ambivalent representation is consistent with research findings indicating that young people in cyberbullying contexts often occupy both victim and perpetrator roles simultaneously. Cybervictimisation may function not only as a consequence but also as a potential precursor of online aggressive behaviour (Lozano-Blasco et al. 2020; Li et al. 2025). However, this complex role dynamic is less prominently reflected in media discourse.

4.2. Criminalisation and Media Representation of Online Aggression

The findings of the study indicate that the relationship between cyberbullying and criminal law regulation is reflected in media discourse only to a limited extent and typically not in an explicit manner ($n = 23$). Although Hungarian criminal law contains several offences that may be applicable to cyberbullying-related conduct, these connections are rarely clearly articulated in media representations.

At the same time, Hungarian regulation aligns in a specific way with European trends in the criminalisation of cyberbullying. The offence of online aggression is explicitly aimed at the criminalisation of violent content in the online environment; however, its scope of application remains relatively narrow. The relatively low level of sanctions and the requirement of a private motion suggest that the policy objective is primarily to address less serious cases.

The media representation of the newly introduced offence of online aggression is particularly noteworthy ($n = 18$). Some of the analysed articles addressed the parliamentary debate and adoption of the draft law ($n = 11$). However, these reports primarily focused on the deterioration of online commenting culture, aggressive online expression, and the quality of public discourse. The JRC analysis and the BIK Policy Map for Hungary both identify the offence of online aggression as a potentially applicable criminal law provision for addressing cyberbullying (Villar Onrubia et al. 2025; O'Neill and Dopona 2025). However, the empirical media analysis suggests that there is a significant discrepancy between European policy interpretations and Hungarian media discourse in this regard.

The analysis of media discourse further shows that only a single case in the examined period explicitly referred to the offence of online aggression, although this same case was reported by multiple online news portals ($n = 3$). In this case, proceedings were initiated against a 17-year-old juvenile for posting threatening content on social media. This suggests that, in media representations, the new offence is primarily framed as a tool for addressing general forms of online communicative deviance and is only loosely connected to the phenomenon of cyberbullying as described in the literature.

Similar discrepancies have been identified in other jurisdictions, where, despite the existence of criminal law instruments potentially applicable to cyberbullying, their practical use and societal visibility remain limited, indicating both normative and implementation gaps (Sekar et al. 2025). This is consistent with broader international findings suggesting that the criminalisation of online harassment often has limited practical significance, as the phenomenon is shaped by a range of individual, social, and media-related factors (Mittal 2024).

This discursive discrepancy is also in line with the literature emphasising that cyberbullying is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, the conceptual and legal boundaries of which are not uniform, and which therefore cannot easily be accommodated within the framework of a single criminal offence (Xu and Trzaskawka 2021).

The limited alignment between criminal law and media discourse can also be better understood in light of the comparative findings on EU Member States. As the analysis has shown, the criminalisation of cyberbullying across the EU is characterised by significant conceptual variation. While aggressive or harmful conduct is consistently present, other key elements of cyberbullying—such as repetition, power imbalance, or the explicit role of

digital technology—are only partially or inconsistently reflected in criminal law provisions. This fragmented regulatory landscape suggests that criminal law does not operate with a uniform or comprehensive conceptualisation of cyberbullying, which may in turn contribute to the limited and selective way in which legal responses are represented in media discourse. From a cultural criminological perspective, this fragmentation further illustrates how the social meaning of cyberbullying is constructed through the interaction between legal discourse, media representation, and broader cultural interpretations of online harm and deviance.

4.3. *The Limited Role of High-Profile Cases*

International research has consistently shown that media representations of cyberbullying are often shaped by high-profile cases involving tragic or dramatic events. Such cases frequently serve as reference points in public discourse and may contribute to the strengthening of criminalisation processes (Milosevic 2015).

However, the findings of the present study indicate that this pattern is observable only to a limited extent in the Hungarian online media environment. Most of the analysed articles did not rely on individual, dramatized cases when presenting cyberbullying, but rather addressed the phenomenon as a broader social and child protection issue ($n = 79$).

Although some specific cases—such as the social media post threatening a school shooting—were covered by multiple media outlets, these did not become recurring reference points structuring media discourse. Instead, Hungarian media discourse appears to follow a more institutional and preventive logic and relies less on narratives centred on dramatized, individual cases.

At the same time, content analyses conducted in Malaysia and India suggest that, in other media environments, representations of cyberbullying tend to emphasize prevention, institutional responses, and mental health concerns rather than focusing on isolated, dramatized cases. This indicates that the dominance of high-profile cases is not universal but may depend on the characteristics of the media system and the broader cultural context (Vranda et al. 2023; Yang 2020).

These findings challenge the implicit assumption in parts of the literature that high-profile cases are the primary drivers of media—episodic—framing in cyberbullying discourse. This interpretation is further supported by recent research on Hungarian media coverage of cyberbullying-related issues. A content analysis of Hungarian news reporting on a popular Netflix miniseries addressing cyberbullying found that, although the topic initially received significant media attention, the coverage remained short-lived and largely failed to engage with the underlying social issues or promote awareness among parents and educators (Banyasz et al. 2025).

4.4. *Media Discourse, Digital Governance and Children's Rights*

In the European Union, in the context of the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA) (European Parliament, Council of the European Union 2022), the European Commission has highlighted the role of measures aimed at reducing exposure to harmful content, the development of reporting systems, and guidelines for trusted flaggers in addressing cyberbullying (European Commission 2026). These measures approach the management of harmful content in the digital environment—including cyberbullying—primarily through platform regulation and content moderation tools.

In this context, the offence of online aggression in Hungarian criminal law is connected in a specific way to the regulation of the digital media environment. The provision not only responds to violent online content through criminal law instruments but also indirectly affects the operation of digital media platforms, particularly through the moderation of

public comment sections. This dual function can be understood in that the regulation both criminalises certain forms of online communicative behaviour and encourages online news outlets to implement effective moderation of unlawful content. This approach aligns with broader European trends in digital media governance, which increasingly combine criminal law instruments with platform regulation and content moderation tools (Švec et al. 2024).

The findings also indicate that the criminal law treatment of cyberbullying across EU Member States is not uniform, and that legal responses often rely on the application of existing offences, such as harassment, threats, or defamation. Classical elements of cyberbullying—such as repetition or power imbalance—often appear only indirectly in criminal law regulation. This supports the view that cyberbullying has primarily developed as a social and pedagogical concept, and that its translation into criminal law raises significant doctrinal challenges.

At the same time, media discourse does not merely reflect changes in legal regulation but also actively contributes to shaping societal legal awareness. The empirical findings of this study show that, in Hungarian online media, cyberbullying is primarily framed as a child protection and social problem rather than as a primary object of criminal law intervention. This narrative emphasis is consistent with the broader European regulatory approach, which increasingly combines legal instruments with platform regulation, prevention, and awareness-raising measures.

This approach is also in line with international children's rights frameworks, which emphasize prevention, education, and victim support rather than the exclusive reliance on criminal law instruments. It also resonates with recent scholarship highlighting that cyberbullying can be understood as a violation of human dignity, which constitutes a foundational principle of children's rights and human rights more broadly (Milosevic et al. 2023). In this regard, Section 7 of Act XXX of 2024 on the Amendment of Certain Laws for the Protection of Children introduces a distinctive approach, as it formulates not only rights but also obligations for children in the digital environment. Specifically, it amends Section 10(1) of Act XXXI of 1997 on the Protection of Children and Guardianship Administration by introducing a new obligation, according to which children are required, in exercising their right to freedom of expression—including in the context of internet or media services—to respect the human dignity of other children. This provision can be directly linked to the phenomenon of cyberbullying, as it explicitly frames harmful online conduct as a violation of dignity.

These three regulatory dimensions—criminal law criminalisation, governance mechanisms affecting the operation of digital platforms, and preventive approaches aimed at fostering responsible digital behaviour—together shape the current regulatory framework for addressing cyberbullying (Kovács-Szépölggyi et al. 2026). The findings thus contribute to children's rights scholarship by highlighting how media discourse may prioritise protective and preventive interpretations over punitive approaches in the digital environment.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that Hungarian media discourse primarily frames cyberbullying as a child protection and social problem, while the criminal law perspective plays a more limited role. The connection between cyberbullying and the criminal offence of online aggression rarely appears in media representations, indicating that the phenomenon is more often approached through preventive and institutional frameworks than through a narrative of criminalisation. The study contributes to a better understanding of how media discourse shapes the legal and social interpretation of cyberbullying, particularly in the context of the protection of children.

The empirical analysis is subject to certain limitations. The media discourse analysis covered a specific period and a selected group of online news outlets. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the entire media environment. In addition, the use of the concept of cyberbullying in Hungarian is not uniform, and several partially overlapping terms—such as “online harassment”, “online abuse”, or “online aggression”—are used in media discourse, which may affect the identification and interpretation of relevant content. The use of predefined keywords may have influenced the selection of articles, as media content addressing cyberbullying without explicitly using these terms could not be captured. Consequently, some relevant articles discussing online abuse, peer aggression, or harmful digital behaviour may have remained outside the sample despite addressing substantively similar phenomena.

These findings underline the importance of integrating media analysis into the development and evaluation of legal and policy responses to cyberbullying, particularly in the context of children’s rights in the digital environment.

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